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ABSTRACT

The paper deals primarily with the components of culture that preclude rejection of developmentally disabled persons with a view toward minifying these attitudes in the future. Reviewed are such components of culture as democratic ideals, religious factors, economic factors, and educational practices which foster negative attitudes toward the handicapped. It is concluded that society should internalize the functions that retarded people can contribute to the whole order of society. (Author/SBH)

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COMPONENTS OF CULTURE THAT PRECLUDE REJECTION OF DEVELOPMENTALLY DISABLED PERSONS--CHILDREN AND ADULTS

Panel Presentation

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I. Ignacy Goldberg (1972) wrote in his foreword to Lippman's work:

> Mr. Lippman's valuable account confirms my contention that all other changes are pro forma in our work with the handicapped unless the underlying attitudes are changed first. This, I am sure, poses a vast and exciting challenge to those of us who want to provide more effective services in the United States.

Just as Goldberg backtracked from society's behavior to the more fundamental basis of attitudes, it must be kept in mind that there is a step preceding attitudes that is more fundamental as an initial cause creating quality of human nature. The essence of this relationship can be stated in the question, Why does society hold its attitudes concerning mentally retarded people?, or what factors are fundamental in delineating these attitudes that society holds?

Lippman (1972) stated that society's attitudes toward the mentally retarded have been studied by a large number of researchers. But in the same study he reported, "There was surprisingly little about attitudes, either in this country or abroad [p. 7]." Again in this same study Lippman adds:

> To judge by the amount of material published, it would appear that the subject of "Attitudes on Mental Retardation" has been studied to the point of exhaustion. . . (But of) printouts of 220 abstracts, from 131 professional journals and other sources [1]. . . yet fewer than a half-dozen dealt with basic philosophical, ethical or cultural value systems. [p. 103].

Yet, even when authorities pin-point the problem to the basic question of determining man's attitudes, it must be noted that Rokeach (1960) states there is little theory and research about the nature, formation, learning, and change of attitude systems. Without this basic knowledge it will be difficult to determine what the precise factors are that create society's rejection of mentally retarded people.

A further dimension, that of ethical or philosophical implications, is raised by Roos in his reference to Skinner (1972).

Attitudes are both a product of culture and an influence upon it. Attitudes are taught and they are born of experience.

Down to the contemporary period western society has continued in this rejection.

The period following World War II saw a general awakening to the needs of mentally retarded people. Primarily through the efforts of the parents of handicapped children, life in the community became a reality for a larger number of mentally retarded people. Yet this sector of society continued to live a segregated life even within the community. Basically the attitude of society in general remained one of rejection. Society's open public hostility was covered by a veneer of public sympathetic tolerance and private rejection.

To appreciate society's duplicity, the cultural components that preclude rejection of the developmentally disabled must be recognized.

Components of Culture

Ethically, mankind knows it is wrong to reject its developmentally disabled members. Individual people who recognize this situation may very well attempt to work actively toward society's acceptance of this segment; yet, when they do, they often fail. Various reasons can account for this failure. Of primary consideration is the multi-faceted structure of our society including the following components of culture: democratic ideals, interpretations of religious teachings, economic competition, educational procedures, political inequalities, and sociological

implications.

In discussing the democratic ideals that promote the rejection of developmentally disabled persons, one must recognize the fact that there is an ambivalence between the historical fact and the perspective that society holds, which we call myth, i.e., the American melting pot. Consequently, society will deny that they reject persons who are developmentally disabled on the basis of democratic ideals. Yet, the evidence indicates that this rejection is real and in many cases held by large numbers of society at the subconscious level.

Those democratic ideals that are of particular importance in fostering this rejection include: 1) everyone is created equal, 2) competition is essential to maintain the system, 3) unilateral cooperation fosters socialism, 4) the person that makes the most important contribution to society personally should benefit the most materially, and 5) the success or failure of any individual person is the result of his own initiative or lack of it.

Those factors of religion that contribute to society's rejection, include the following: 1) the individual person's predicament is the result of his own moral failures (e.g., Job, "The Man Born Blind"), 2) God blesses the good person with a sound body and

mind and punishes the evil person with physical afflictions and handicaps, 3) some people are destined to suffer in order that they may remain faithful, and 4) human relations have a rational, intellectual orientation rather than a relationship based on love and respect for the other person.

Of those factors of an economic nature that preclude rejection of developmentally disabled persons, the major considerations include: 1) a person's handicap affects his ability to work unilaterally 2) a handicapped person costs his employing firm more both to educate (train) him for the job and to maintain him than it does an employee who is not handicapped, 3) competition among private industry justifies the non-hiring policies that employers maintain, 4) since handicapped persons are marginal producers and consumers, therefore, they as a market cannot be considered.

Educational practices that foster negative attitudes toward handicapped persons include labeling. Labeling tends to 1) eradicate the individual personality of mentally retarded people and make them a stereotyped group, 2) maintain the academic milieu of school programs instead of creating vocational and socialization emphases,

3) deny the mentally retarded person individualized instruction, 4) segregate the mentally retarded person socially (school, neighborhood and work), 5) deny or greatly restrict him in regard to civil rights and liberties (the right to vote).

The final 'structure' is the sociological. In general society contends: 1) that a person's social maturity is consistent with his chronological age, 2) everyone can be held responsible for his deviance from social conformity, 3) the principle of 'survival of the fittest' is applicable to human sociology, and 4) marriage cannot be contracted unless the two spouses are capable of economic independence.

The simple enumeration of factors belies the complexity of their interaction as forces of culture. It is apparent that the life of the individual person cannot be adequately analyzed by a distillation of these forces. One can only experience the culture in action to recognize and appreciate the totality of the integrated individual.

Related to this is the problem of assigning weight or force to each of the cultural components. For example, with one person the force of religion may be appreciably greater than with another person. Consequently, each situation must be regarded on an

individual basis. Secondly, this judgment is significantly more subjective in nature rather than objective. It is apparent that a variety of conclusions may be expounded from a single study. Therefore, it is important to repeat our point of view that it is only through experiencing the culture in action that an awareness of the totality of the integrated individual can be discerned.

To explain this approach, we employ the analogy of baking bread. The components of culture are the individual ingredients: yeast, flour, salt, water, etc. that go into making the dough. But once the dough is placed in the pans and the baking occurs then we no longer speak of individual ingredients but only of the bread as a single commodity. Yet, when we analyze the bread, we say that the bread needs more salt, or less yeast, etc.

Group Cultural and Social Demands

It is readily apparent that the whole of society is divided into complex arrangements of subgroups. Each achieves its cohesiveness by demanding of its member a given number of behaviorial norms. The type and extent of the behavior norms that are required for group membership will determine the degree of exclusiveness that any particular group wants to develop and maintain.

At times these demands are oriented to economic factors. Wealth is a large determinant of who can become a member. At other times an elaborate ritual of social etiquette is demanded in order to screen out people who don't belong. The ability of mentally retarded people to cope with these artifical demands is indeed limited, but the importance of the ability to do so cannot be ignored or minimized.

In social situations including the place of employment, there is a related problem. Often mentally retarded people are thought of in stereotyped terms: dependent, largely incapable of constructive effort, never self-reliant, without imagination, slow in grasping instructions, etc.

Most people require a large degree of sameness in their daily living patterns in order to maintain their own identity or self-image and desire to maintain life. Cultural value systems reject the out-group ideas and accept the in-group beliefs. By adhering to the value system the individual maintains his identity, his acceptance by the group (security) and continues his desire to maintain life.

The child is indoctrinated into the parental value system. When these values have moral or religious implications, then acceptance of

individuals unlike themselves becomes an impossibility. The practice of rejection becomes even more severe when these values that demand rejection of persons unlike the in-group concern the basic ability of the person to cope with daily living and with external existence, e.g., the ethic that contends married couples should be economically independent and that they should be able to rear their children independently.

Society tries to justify marital restrictions and birth control among the mentally handicapped. But the real reason is society's inability to adequately rear the mentally handicapped child to an adult who has the level of social and economic capability to meet the demands of daily living in society's own preconceived life style.

Democratic idealism (but not necessarily a practice in daily life situations) entails acceptance, sharing, equality, considerateness, belongingness, security, etc. To accept mentally retarded people, society establishes institutional pathways, e.g., special education schools, fund drive organizations, humanitarian visitations to institutions, etc. to bridge the chasm over rejection to acceptance (Roeher, 1972). This procedure depersonalizes society's acceptance of the mentally retarded. The institutional framework creates

a collective acceptance of the mentally retarded. Society maintains a vertical relationship with the mentally retarded sector. In this arrangement society creates a pseudo-acceptance and maintains its own ego.

The term life style is subject to ambiguity. In general, though, it refers to the type of living patterns that a person can pursue. In this respect one's life style may be regarded as confining or conservative, independent or liberal.

Religious beliefs and customs often establish unfounded structures in the lives of the mentally handicapped. If a society regards the mentally handicapped to be less than human, then it justifies an elaborate network of confining rules and regulations. Institutionalization usually results in restricting the lives of the residents to same sex associations. Both for the convenience of the care personnel and to prevent propagation of mentally deficient offspring, each sex is housed in separate quarters. Only those residents who are capable of proper social constraint are permitted to associate with residents of the opposite sex at certain specific times.

Man venerates or holds in high esteem his intellectual faculty. Human progress is the story of man's use of his intellectual capabilities. The mentally retarded are often considered the least acceptable even of all the handicapped as illustrated by the stated attitude of some deaf people that

mentally retarded people and not deaf people are handicapped.

The nature of democratic behavior is based on three cultural values: 1) freedom to act as self-directing individuals in dealing with peers and peer groups, 2) belief in the sharing of responsibility as a necessary contribution to freedom, 3) faith in critical thinking as the best way to solve a free society's problems.

It is understandable that the mentally retarded, as the least effective segment of society able to make a contribution to society become the primary target of that segment of society who advocate rejection and isolation of the mentally retarded.

When a segment of a democratic society is labeled non-contributors, then that group is unworthy of being a part of it. It has been on this basis of rejection that certain minority groups, e.g., black people and American Indians, have been denied the rights of citizenship.

The philosophy of democratic equality is often misunderstood (Smith, 1972) because the term 'created equal' is applied to the inequality of human existence in the physical, intellectual, social, economic, etc. aspects of daily life. It is not that man was created differently, but that he is born differently. Society's acceptance of

mentally handicapped people must rely on an equality that goes beyond the physical, the material aspects of reality. This reality is the reality of man's soulness. This equality must be based on an understanding of this true equality of humanity. It must be motivated by love and carried out with the knowledge of what it means to be human.

The decade of the sixties throughout the world brought to the foreground a reemphasis on man's basic need for love. With that term a variety of other terms were employed to demonstrate the process whereby human beings reveal love. Consequently, to love is to accept the other person; to love is to understand him; to love is to acknowledge him. Whatever terms are used, the process of loving is one of human relations. Our understanding of love is resolved in our concept of what it means to be human.

Having lost the image of love all mankind is deformed of this quality. Although mankind is continually striving to regain the relationship of love, it is more natural for man to employ the use of vertical relationships that are rooted in the human quality of intellectual authority. The authority of love is incomprehensible to man's thought processes and action policies.

As a result those members of a society who cannot function intellectually are outside of or beyond

the scope of this normal human relationship. Those members of society who cannot communicate their intelligence also find themselves outside the normal sector of society. It is the mentally retarded sector of handicapped people who constitute the lowest relationship to normal society.

Conclusion

It is difficult, and sometimes seems impossible, to psychologically assimilate a helping relationship with mentally retarded people that is truly horizontal in the spirit of equality. Yet this is possible. In a variety of ways the Bible speaks of the human relationship of equality. In the term 'agape' love is stated as a principle. Love is total commitment to a person's well-being without thought of return. It is not paternalistic; it is more than friendship; it is more than acquaintanceship. It is exemplified in God's love for man when man was not lovable; it is exemplified in the love of brothers.

Optimally, society should internalize the functions that retarded people can contribute to the whole order of society. What that contribution is for the individual mentally retarded person is not to be determined by label classifications; neither is it limited by the expectancy profiles of standardized testing procedures.

Any decision that jeopardizes the right of mentally handicapped people to make their own decisions, limites their free will to make choices and dismembers them from the society of man (Ravanello and Wickham, 1972). Making decisions is inherent in the very psyche of what constitutes being human. Decision-making is one of the primary indications of growth from infancy to adulthood. A society that has a proper relationship among all its members including the mentally retarded sector can develop the procedures necessary so that all of its members can contribute to the whole of society. The question is not can society, but rather how will society do this?

The biblical admonition, "It is more blessed to give than to receive," can be regarded psychologically as the benefits of a vertical relationship (Forshay and Wann, 1954). When the human relationship of giving and receiving is a relationship of love, the parties involved are in a horizontal relationship. Both parties are in a position to give. Both parties are members of the same body.

In applying this to society's relationship with mentally retarded people, society as the giver in a vertical relationship does not seek out the values of returned love that mentally retarded people are capable

of and eager to offer. Society lives by its predetermined stereotype that all mentally retarded people are poor unfortunates who have nothing of value to share. Among the blessings that a giver receives is that his action opens the horizontal human relationship of love. Just as Forster and Marston (1974) stated: "To our western minds, the word righteous not only implies ethical perfection; it tends also to have connotations of self-righteous, [p. 153]" so the word mercy has its own peculiar western implication of one person in righteous duty bestowing help or assistance on another person in an inferior position. It is only when mercy becomes regarded as a mutual sustaining relationship of love that it loses this aspect of self-righteousness.